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A Check List

for Evaluating the English Program in the Junior and Senior High School

Prepared by the Commission on the Curriculum of the National Council of Teachers of English*

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During the recent years of ferment in American education, the public schools, always the subject of debate, have come under searching examination. As the course dealing with the fundamental processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and therefore the most generally required course in the school curriculum, English has come under especially sharp scrutiny. A number of organizations, both lay and professional, have been engaged in studying the English curriculum and in making recommendations and proposals at local, state, regional, and national levels. It is a weighty responsibility for individual school faculties to evaluate new proposals and criticisms, sometimes conflicting, and to plan programs geared to scholarship and research and to local needs and conditions. In order to aid local schools in this task, the Curriculum Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English appointed a special committee to prepare this check list. The committee drew on the work of the Commission which has been studying the English program at all school levels since 1945, as well as on many other sources. The questions phrased here reflect modern research and scholarship in the teaching of English and the tested practice of the most successful secondary schools. The Commission hopes that these questions lead local school faculties to the thorough examination of their programs from which all improvement ultimately must stem.

PROCEDURES IN PLANNING THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

1. Does the Department of English have a definitely planned, *written* curriculum, though one that permits a reasonable degree of flexibility and adaptation?
2. Has the English faculty formulated clear objectives based on analysis of *all* of the following:
   a. Nature of the English language, the forms of literature, and the literary tradition?
   b. The communication needs of a literate democratic society?

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c. Special community needs and characteristics?
d. Needs, interests, and characteristics of adolescents at various ages?
e. Nature of the components of effective reading, writing, speaking, and listening?

3. Is the English curriculum planned to develop to the maximum the potentialities of all students at each grade level, regardless of ability or of vocational and educational plans?

4. Does the English program through the various grades represent a carefully and realistically planned sequence?
a. Are average expectancies defined for each grade in reading ability, writing ability, insight into language structure, perceptivity in literature, and speaking and listening ability?
b. Does the program take cognizance of the inevitable range in language abilities which will exist in any given grade, and even *within* groups such as "college-bound" students?
c. Do the content and activities in English from grade to grade indicate a gradual increase of maturity? Is unnecessary repetition from one year to the next avoided?
d. Does the program avoid activities and content peripheral or irrelevant to the study of language and literature, e.g., units on occupations, units on dating and manners?

5. Is there provision for communication among English teachers of different levels? For example, are there meetings of junior high school teachers with teachers in "feeder" elementary schools, or between high school teachers and English teachers in colleges and universities in the area?

6. Is there a consistent effort on the part of the English faculty to keep informed on and to evaluate innovations in curriculum procedures?
a. Has the faculty studied the possibilities of television instruction, team teaching, block scheduling, use of teaching machines and programmed learning, use of lay personnel?
b. Are new departures, such as those listed above, adopted because of their proved value in advancing the objectives of the English program and not merely because of their convenience to the teacher, their efficiency from an administrative point of view, or their potential for saving money?

TEACHING CONDITIONS

1. Are the teaching loads of English teachers maintained at a level which makes possible effective teaching of writing—i.e., not more than one hundred students per day?

2. Are teachers given professional freedom in choosing selections of literature for study by their classes and in making other decisions concerning materials and methods to be employed?

3. Are teachers given adequate time for planning their courses and lessons?

4. Are teachers given adequate time for participation in professional activities?

5. Are valuable opportunities for in-service education made available?

6. Are classrooms well-lighted and ventilated and equipped with class libraries, chalkboards, shelves, filing space, and other equipment?

7. Do the teachers have adequate secretarial service and supplies?

8. Are clerical duties, chaperoning, ticket selling at school events, etc., kept at an absolute minimum for teachers?

LITERATURE

1. Is literature study planned so as to give balanced attention to:
   a. the student's development through literature—his greater insight into human experience, both of his contemporaries and of the adult world?
   b. the student's acquaintance with the literary tradition, defined not merely as his knowledge of titles, authors, and literary periods, but also as his awareness of major ideas which run through literature of all times?
   c. the student's understanding of literature as art, of the various genres as art forms?
2. In each of the grades do the students study intensively several major works appropriate for the grade?
   a. Is there balance in the program for the several years among the various literary genres—novel, short story, poetry, drama, essay, non-fiction?
   b. Is instruction in how to read the genres a part of the work in each grade?
   c. Is there a planned effort to develop the student's meaningful command of the terminology used in analyzing and criticizing literature?
3. Are the selections for group study in each grade chosen carefully in terms of their enduring qualities as literature and their appropriateness to student interest and abilities?
   a. Do students study works as challenging as they are able to cope with, and at the same time do teachers avoid introducing certain "classics" known to be beyond the level of ability and experience of young people and widely unpopular with them?
   b. In heterogeneous classes, do teachers frequently assign different selections for study in sub-groups organized according to levels of student ability?
   c. In programs in which students are sectioned by ability, do the works studied at each ability level usually differ? In the approach to selections are inevitable differences among pupils within each level taken into account?
4. Is the anthology-textbook, if one is used, regarded as a resource rather than as a course of study?
   a. Are paperbound books and supplementary hardbound books used extensively?
   b. Are the study aids in the anthology-textbook used discriminately and analyzed for their soundness and appropriateness for given classes?
   c. Are teachers free to determine the organizational pattern of the literature program no matter what pattern is followed in the adopted anthology-textbook? For example, is a twelfth-grade teacher free to use some other organizational pattern even though the textbook-anthology may present a chronological survey of British literature?
5. Are organizational patterns of the literature program in each grade determined in terms of the age levels and ability levels of classes?
   a. Are different organizational patterns—types, topics, themes, etc.—frequently followed in classes of different levels of ability within the same grade?
   b. Do the organizational patterns promote an emphasis on experience with literature rather than information about literature?

6. Is extensive individual reading a definitely planned part of the literature program?

a. Are students given guidance in working out individual reading designs and in choosing books for individual reading?

b. Is individual reading frequently related to the classroom units of study in literature?

c. Are the individual reading requirements planned according to the ability levels of students so that able students are challenged and weak students are not given impossible tasks?

d. Is variety maintained in the ways in which students discuss and report on their individual reading so that personal judgment and evaluation of literary worth are encouraged?

e. Is there available a generous supply of books which meet the real interests of adolescents?

f. Do students have ample opportunity for individual use of the library?

7. Does the literature program reflect a balance in approaches to literature and in classroom procedures, avoiding such practices as over-emphasis on enforced memorizing of verse, isolated defining of literary terms, strained or forced correlating of literature with history or other disciplines, over-emphasis on paraphrasing or on seeking "morals"?

READING

1. Is instruction in reading and study skills an integral part of the curriculum in all subjects?

2. Does the program give attention to improvement of vocabulary and of techniques of word recognition?

a. Are needed concepts and word meanings developed through pre-reading experiences?

b. When necessary, is the pupil given help in developing his basic sight vocabulary?

c. Are all techniques of word recognition—phonetic analysis, structural analysis, use of context clues—given attention?

d. Does the vocabulary-building program emphasize the development of skills of word attack and the relation of meaning to the pupils' backgrounds of experience in order to avoid mere verbalization?

3. Does the program aid students in improving the various skills necessary for comprehension in reading, e.g., reading to follow directions; reading for details; reading for main points or ideas; reading to select data bearing on a question or problem; reading to determine relationships; reading to organize; reading to evaluate or criticize; reading to compare or contrast; reading for implied meanings; reading to form sensory impressions; reading maps, graphs, charts, tables, etc.; and skimming?

4. Is the school library adequate to support the reading program?

a. Does the library meet the standards of the American Library Association?

b. Do teachers and librarians plan cooperatively for pupil instruction in the use of the library?

5. Is there available for each classroom an abundant supply of reading materials of interest to students and appropriate for a wide range of reading achievement levels?

a. Do teachers assign reading materials appropriate to the achievement, interest, and maturity of the individual pupil?
b. Are pupils encouraged to broaden their reading tastes from one type of book to other types, from one field of interest to other fields, and from one level of maturity to a higher level?
c. Does the program build a habit of out-of-school, non-assigned reading for additional learning and for pleasure?
d. Are magazines and newspapers an important reference for class assignments? Do pupils understand the role of periodicals in our society? Do pupils know how to read them efficiently and critically?

WRITING

1. Is provision made in the English program for an adequate amount of motivated writing suited to the ability of individuals within the class?
a. Is a reasonable amount of writing (*some* sustained writing every week) a definite part of each year's program?
b. Is practice afforded both in rapid writing (such as that required in examinations) and in meticulously planned, prepared, and revised writing representative of each student's best effort?
c. Is most student writing intended for a specific group of readers (usually classmates, seldom the teacher alone)?
2. Does the curriculum provide specifically for the various types of writing likely to be of greatest usefulness to students now and later?
a. Is writing on various kinds of subjects planned according to some sort of sequence with more mature thinking and reflection to be expected as pupils progress through the grades?
b. Are assignments given requiring, at various times, treatment in expository, descriptive, narrative, and argumentative prose, and in appropriate combinations of the four types?
c. Is sufficient practice given in "practical" writing, e.g., writing examinations, writing friendly and business letters, writing simple reports? For the writing of reports, is instruction offered in the proper use of source materials?
d. Is imaginative or personal writing, often called "creative writing," encouraged in all students, with special provisions made for those who are high in interest or aptitude? Are principles that are sometimes treated only in units in creative writing, such as choice of effective verbs and avoidance of clichés, a part of all instruction in writing?
e. Is the inclusion of "research" or "library" papers in the upper years carefully considered in the light of their usefulness for the students concerned?
f. Are topics for compositions, even though adhering to a pattern, sufficiently individualized to encourage and challenge each student to do his best possible work on topics of interest to him? Are the different interests and rates of development of the two sexes taken into consideration in the composition program?
3. Is writing related to other parts of the course in English?
a. Do certain of the topics for composition arise naturally from the class's current study of literature and language?

b. Are principles learned in the study of language applied, as appropriate, to student writing?
c. Are students given practice in writing words that they have only recently encountered?
d. Are superior students encouraged to try out in their own writing some of the methods of organization, methods of development, and stylistic devices they have observed in professional writing?

4. Does instruction cover all important aspects of composition?

a. Is special stress placed on the importance of content, with clear realization that accuracy in mechanics is almost useless unless the student has something to say?
b. Is clear thinking emphasized?
c. Are students taught to organize ideas clearly, elaborating and illustrating with care? Are they taught the nature of the paragraph and its relationship to the total organization of the composition?
d. Is instruction given in choice of precise and effective words and in variety and clarity in sentence structure? Are able students made conscious of elements of style?

5. Is student writing evaluated consistently for specific elements stressed in each particular assignment?

a. Does evaluation take into account content, clarity of thought and oranization, and then sentence structure, word choice, usage, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization?
b. Does evaluation include constructive comment first, and then suggest specific means of improving the composition? Is evaluation based upon the understanding that the person who marks a paper has a unique opportunity to provide for individual differences? Does the evaluation lead to a desire on the pupil's part to try again?
c. Does the teacher emphasize a few elements at a time, recognizing the difference between proofreading and teaching?
d. Are grading standards progressively higher for each year?
e. Is opportunity provided for teachers to compare their standards of evaluation?

6. Is the writing program intended to give students practice not only in the development of a useful skill of communication, but also in the development of ideas, the examination of their own ideas, the expansion of their horizons, the enrichment of their lives, and the use of language to inform, persuade, clarify, describe, narrate, and give pleasure?

7. Is the student made responsible for judging his own composition, and for proofreading *before* he asks anyone else to read it?

LANGUAGE

1. Is study of the English language included in the curriculum because of its cultural value as well as its practical usefulness?

a. Is the realization clearly expressed that language is a uniquely human possession and that study of man's developing use of language sheds light upon man himself?
b. Are the practical applications of language taught as positive principles rather than negative prohibitions?

2. Is room provided in the curriculum for presentation of basic linguistic knowledge according to the ability of individual pupils to profit from such instruction?

a. Are students familiarized with the role of language in modern life?

b. Do students learn, through study of the history of the English language and study of current usage, that language is constantly changing and that "right" and "wrong," with reference to language, are only relative terms? Do they learn that "wrong" means either unclear or out of harmony with current practice of educated Americans?

c. Do students learn the particular types of symbols that English uses, including the sentence patterns, form classes, function words, and patterns of intonation characteristic of our language? Is such instruction constantly adjusted to the known ability of individual pupils?

d. Do students learn something about the backgrounds of many words and about the changes in meaning that words may undergo? Do they recognize the extensive use of metaphor in daily language?

3. Does the curriculum reveal the influence of twentieth-century studies of the language and of the ways in which language is learned?

a. Does the program in grammar recognize the most pertinent and generally accepted findings of modern grammarians so as to avoid such old misconceptions as "A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought," stressing rather the use of modification in the expression of increasingly complex ideas as maturity in thinking develops?

b. Is the study of grammar never permitted to degenerate into exercises in identification and terminology?

c. Is inductive rather than deductive presentation of grammatical principles recommended? Are "parts of speech" or "form classes," for instance, taught mainly through specific and tangible illustrations rather than through abstract definitions?

d. Does the curriculum emphasize sentence building rather than concentration on sentence analysis?

e. Are truths of modern usage taught rather than such untruths or half-truths as those about splitting infinitives, ending sentences with prepositions, and using *shall* and *will*?

f. Do students learn how punctuation is related to both grammar and intonation?

g. Do students learn such basic principles of semantics as these: a word is not a thing; meanings of words change with time (*democracy*^{1800} is not the same as *democracy*^{1962}) and with place (*democracy*^{USA} is not the same as *democracy*^{USSR}); "loaded," or emotional, words are likely to affect a reader or listener differently from unemotional words?

4. Instead of attempting to offer a complete and repetitive course in grammar each year, do teachers concentrate on selected trouble spots?

a. Does the curriculum designate certain areas for major concentration each year and grant individual teachers freedom to alter the emphasis and make additions or deletions as need arises in their classes?

b. Is there constant differentiation of program and of levels of abstraction suitable for pupils of different levels of ability?

5. Is there a consistent program for improvement of spelling? of punctuation? of usage?

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

1. Do the English teachers accept their responsibility to include instruction in speaking and listening as part of the English program?
   a. Does the program include instruction in how to improve speaking and listening as well as practice in using these skills?
   b. Are criteria for evaluation of speaking and listening experiences developed and accepted by the students?
   c. Are strong points mentioned before adverse criticism is introduced?
2. Is the instructional program in speaking and listening based on the communication of ideas?
   a. Does each speaking and listening assignment have a purpose clearly defined in the minds of both speaker and listeners?
   b. Is the speaker encouraged to consider carefully the basic elements of (1) content, (2) organization, and (3) appeal in planning each speech?
   c. Are students encouraged to take mental notes of new or challenging ideas?
   d. Can listeners distinguish between main ideas and supporting details?
   e. Is the value of what is communicated the first criterion for evaluating the success of the assignment?
   f. Is the student held to a high standard of accuracy in his reporting of what he hears, sees, and reads?
3. Do speakers and listeners understand the basic organizational patterns of expository speeches? Is experience given in planning and detecting the attention-getting opening, the statement of purpose, the main points of the argument or topic, the final summary or conclusion?
4. Is instruction in the important forms of public and private speech included in the program, e.g., the interview, informal and formal discussions and debates, platform speaking, and oral interpretation of literature?
5. Is help given to pupils in overcoming common problems in speech delivery?
   a. Are pupils free of extreme deviations from the normal speech patterns?
   b. Are pupils pleasant in their speaking and listening associations with others; e.g., is the pupil's voice lively, varied, clear, and comfortable to listen to? Is he free from distracting and annoying body mannerisms? Does he respect the interests and concerns of others? Does he listen actively to others and contribute his share to the discussion?
   c. Are pupils poised and free from anxiety in speech situations? Are they helped to become so by emphasis upon the idea that they are sharing with the class?
6. Are pupils given instruction in how to understand and evaluate radio, motion pictures, and television?
   a. Are the devices of advertising studied as forms of persuasion?
   b. Is a multi-media approach used at times; e.g., are television, motion pictures, and recordings used along with literature so that the several media may be compared as art forms?
   c. Are standards for viewing motion pictures and television programs discussed in class?

NATURE OF CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

1. Does the English course in each grade provide for coordinated attention to reading skills, literature, writing, language study, and speaking and listening skills?

a. Though one aspect of the subject may be stressed at any given time, are the various facets related as much as possible? For example, is grammar studied in conjunction with writing or speaking rather than in isolation?
b. Does each teacher develop units and lessons according to some definite overall plan and a framework of objectives?
c. Does a considerable part of the instruction center on ideas significant to students at given ages rather than on isolated processes or trivial activities?

2. Is there a realistic provision for differences in ability, goals, and cultural values among students?

a. Is there provision for these differences in the assignments given and the units and courses of study planned?
b. Is there an attempt to motivate students of various levels of ability through the setting of differentiated goals and levels of achievement?
c. In programs in which students are sectioned according to ability, are the courses planned specifically for the different levels of ability, or is essentially the same course followed merely with minor quantitative adjustments or at a slower pace? Is there recognition of the fact that all sections are groups of "unique" individuals?
d. Is college preparation in English planned in view of the current facts concerning college entrance tests and needed preparation for college work, or is it an excuse for a lockstep program of drill and memorization?

3. Are adequate materials of instruction available and used?

a. Are the textbooks supplemented by a variety of other materials rather than slavishly followed as a course of study?
b. Are films, filmstrips, recordings, and other audio-visual aids available for use on a flexible basis?

4. Do the members of the English faculty check their programs and procedures against the research and scholarship in the field?

a. Do the teachers actively participate in local, state, and national organizations for English teachers?
b. Are professional publications for teachers of English referred to regularly?
c. Do the English teachers regularly meet for exchange of ideas?
d. Do the English teachers themselves condemn unsound procedures and tactfully urge their colleagues to professional improvement?

EVALUATION

1. Do the English teachers have access to data from a systematic school-wide testing program, or their own testing program, which includes standardized tests of reading and language skills as well as of general intelligence?

2. Do the English teachers have a part in choosing any standardized tests in order to make sure that the tests are appropriate to the objectives of the English program?

3. Is evaluation of achievement in English broadly based?

a. Are standardized tests interpreted cautiously as group rather than as individual measurements?
b. Are standardized tests supplemented by various other methods for evaluating student progress, e.g., teacher-made objective tests, subjective examinations, teacher observation, analysis of writing and of reactions to literature, questionnaires, checks on student choice of individual reading?

4. Is evaluation of student progress a constant part of classroom teaching rather than something relegated to the examination period or testing program?

5. Is evaluation of student progress and achievement and the judgment of excellence in the individual classes geared to a multiple standard which takes account of different levels of ability?

6. In evaluating the competence of individual teachers, does the school administration avoid a heavy emphasis on student performance on standardized tests?

7. Do the English teachers themselves establish the criteria and standards for judging each other's performance?

8. Does the department occasionally evaluate its total program, using some such check list as this one? Is administrative cooperation requested and made available for such evaluation?